

Exploring trans and gender diverse issues in primary education in South Australia

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Executive Summary

An increasing number of young children identify with a gender that differs from that normatively expected of their natally-assigned sex (e.g. Smith & Matthews, 2015; Telfer, Tollit, & Feldman, 2015). Such young children tend to be referred to as trans or gender diverse. The term 'trans' is typically used to refer to people whose gender or gender expression differs from that normatively expected of their natally-assigned sex (where those born with a penis are assigned male and expected to act in stereotypically masculine ways or to present themselves as male, and where those born with a vagina are assigned female and expected to act in stereotypically feminine ways or to present themselves as female). The term 'gender diverse' is typically used to refer to people whose gender identity is not encompassed by the two categories 'male' or 'female'. Importantly, the terms 'trans' and 'gender diverse' encompass a wide range of gender expressions.

While population studies suggest that between 0.5% and 1% of people are trans or gender diverse (Clark et al., 2014; Conron, Scott, Stowell, & Landers, 2012), it has been suggested that figures of gender diversity are significantly higher during childhood (Möller, Schreier, Li, & Romer, 2009). Brill and Pepper (2008) argue that there are three typical ages when people acknowledge that they are trans or gender diverse: childhood, preteen/early adolescence, and late adolescence. For children who disclose that they are trans or gender diverse, the likelihood of having their gender affirmed by others is closely related to people's understandings of gender diversity.

Schools constitute a key context in which children may disclose that they are trans or gender diverse, thus highlighting the importance of schools providing affirming and informed responses. However, research with parents of trans and gender diverse primary school children suggests that a key barrier to inclusion in schools relates to staff members' understandings of gender, and whether issues of gender diversity are viewed as taboo or are positively included within school policies and practices (Pullen Sansfaçon, Robichaud, & Dumais-Michaud, 2015).

Australian research with students at the secondary level has clearly documented trans and gender diverse students' negative experiences of school and the implications of this for their well-being (Jones & Hillier, 2013; Jones et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2014; Ullman, 2015). Australian research with parents of trans children, including at the primary level, has emphasised the importance of supportive schools, and the negative impact of gender stereotyping in schools (Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson, & Diamond, 2013), including by school counsellors and psychologists (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2015).

The important role that schools can play is currently hindered in Australia by two key issues: 1) the lack of opportunities for educator professional development and support for working with trans and gender diverse students, and 2) the broader climate of misunderstanding and fear, evidenced in recent debates about the Safe Schools Coalition.

The research documented in this report extends the limited amount of research about trans and gender diverse issues in primary education internationally. Rather than focusing on individual trans and gender diverse students, the research examines broader school cultures in relation to educator attitudes and knowledge and the usefulness of classroom resources in the form of picture books for creating inclusive schools. The project received ethics approval from Flinders University and the Department for Education and Child Development.

The research objectives of the project were to:

1. Identify the existing attitudes and knowledge of in-service and pre-service primary school teachers in South Australia about trans and gender diverse students and issues
2. Audit available picture books featuring trans or gender diverse characters
3. Explore the usefulness of picture books which include trans characters for use in primary classrooms by examining students' understandings
4. Create an online resource with information for supporting trans and gender diverse young people

An online survey examining attitudes towards inclusion, comfort, and confidence in relation to trans and gender diverse students was completed by a sample of South Australian primary school teachers (n = 75) and pre-service teachers (n = 105). Findings between the two cohorts were very similar. The findings from both groups overall suggest that women had more positive attitudes and greater comfort in working with trans and gender diverse students, and that those who had previously worked with a trans or gender diverse student and who had undertaken training had more positive attitudes, greater comfort, and greater confidence in working with trans and gender diverse students.

An audit of picture books featuring trans or gender diverse characters found that there were 34 such books in existence. Twenty of these books focus on trans characters specifically, while 14 focus on various forms of gender diversity. Of those books currently in existence, only three are Australian. The books provide an array of different storylines and relationships which may be useful for exploring with trans and gender diverse children as well as whole classes of children. However, the books often draw on gender stereotypes, reflecting broader cultural representations and understandings of trans and gender diverse people.

Picture books featuring trans characters were explored in book reading sessions with one class of junior primary school students in a government school in South Australia. These books were useful for encouraging discussion and exploration of trans and gender diverse people's lives. The issues raised in the books were not always clear to the students, although their understandings appeared to grow over the sessions and they were often supportive of the characters. Overall, the salience of hair and clothing in determining gender was central, and many students viewed gender as something fundamental. In some ways the students reiterated the framings of the books in terms of the constructions of binaries (girl/boy) and gender-typed clothing and hair length.

Drawing on these three sources of data, the report concludes with recommendations for developing inclusive school cultures, with a focus on making professional development, resources, and support available to educators. The findings from the three studies highlight the need for:

1. The provision of ongoing teacher education, as professional development and within universities
2. Additional resourcing of programs aimed at facilitating inclusion, such as the Safe Schools Coalition
3. DECD-sanctioned policies and guidelines to support teachers and schools to create inclusive whole school cultures
4. Increase in provision of resources to learn about gender diversity, such as picture books in school libraries, and clearer teaching guides for how to use these in class.

Teacher and Pre-service Teacher Surveys

Previous research with both in-service and pre-service teachers suggests that while in general teachers are positive about the inclusion of trans and gender diverse students in schools, many report a lack of comfort due to a perceived lack of skills and understanding (e.g. McEntarfer, 2016; Smith & Payne, 2016).

A sample of South Australian primary school teachers and pre-service teachers completed a survey that sought to examine attitudes towards inclusion, comfort, and confidence in terms of working with trans and gender diverse students. A total of 180 respondents completed the survey (75 teachers and 105 pre-service teachers). Respondents were recruited through two South Australian universities, professional organisations, and social media promoting the survey.

Respondents were asked about experiences in working with trans and gender diverse students, awareness of the Safe Schools Coalition, and if they had attended training in working with trans and gender diverse students, along with questions about demographic background (see Figures 1 and 2). The respondents also completed measures of attitudes towards inclusion, comfort, and confidence.

The quantitative survey findings suggest that women reported more positive attitudes and greater comfort in working with trans and gender diverse students than did men, and that those who had previously worked with a trans or gender diverse student and who had undertaken training reported more positive attitudes, greater comfort, and greater confidence in working with trans and gender diverse students. The Safe Schools Coalition appeared to play an important role in increasing respondents' comfort and attitudes towards the inclusion of trans and gender diverse students. Further detail about these findings is provided in Figure 4.

The survey also included two open-ended questions about the training and resources respondents would need in order to feel equipped to work with trans and gender diverse students. The responses to these questions demonstrate interest in supporting trans and gender diverse students and making schools more inclusive. However, they also highlight current gaps in terms of opportunities for training and resources provision, knowledge about trans and gender diverse people, and broader guidance on both supporting individual students and teaching about gender diversity in the classroom. A summary of the open-ended responses to training and resources are provided in Figures 4 and 5 respectively.

The survey findings provide support for the continued funding and provision of programs, such as those provided by the Safe Schools Coalition. The findings also show that while in general South Australian in-service and pre-service teachers are willing to work with and support trans and gender diverse students, this would be enhanced by further professional development and resourcing.

Figure 1: Teacher respondents: demographic information and experience

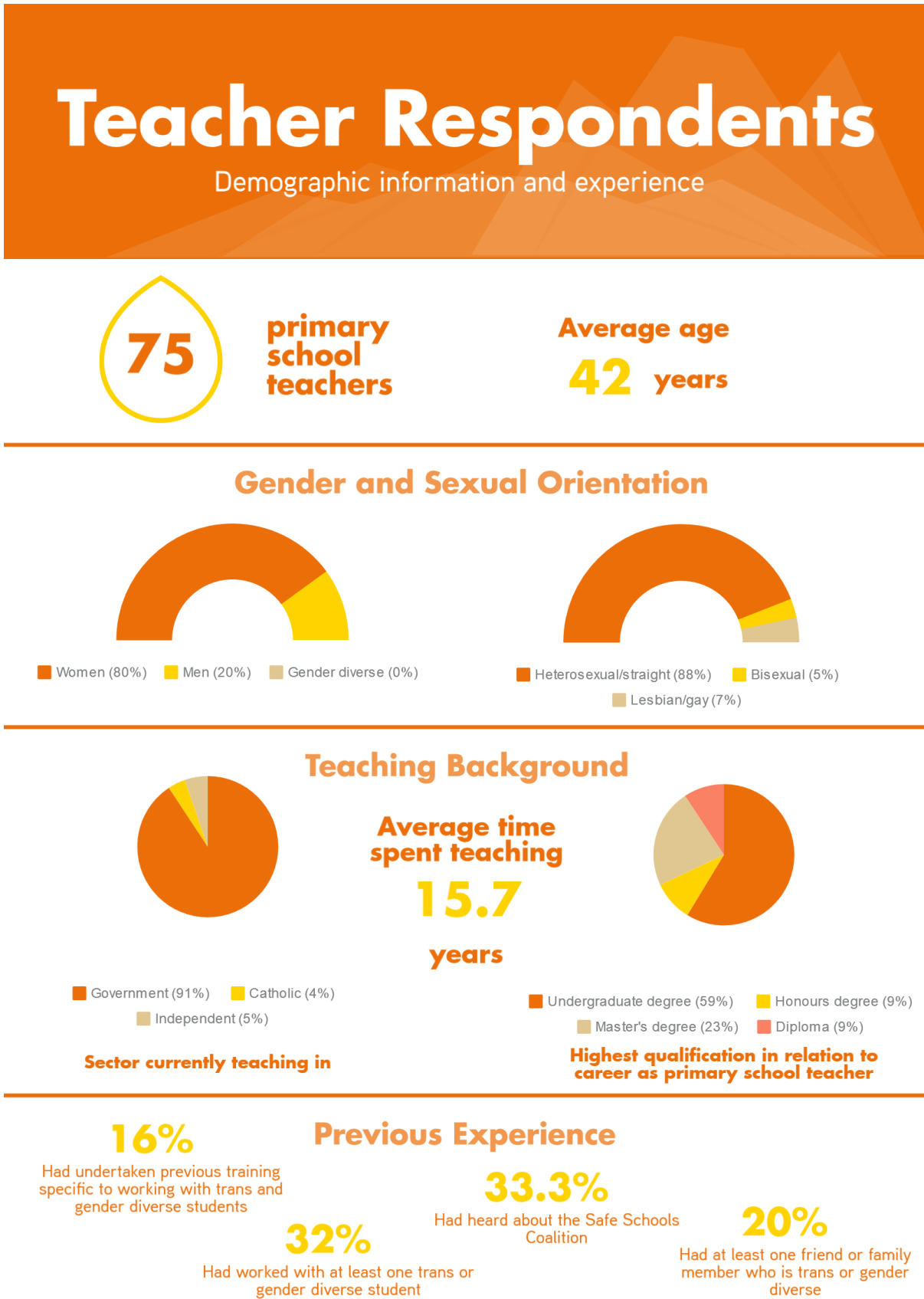


Figure 2: Pre-service teacher respondents: demographic information and experience

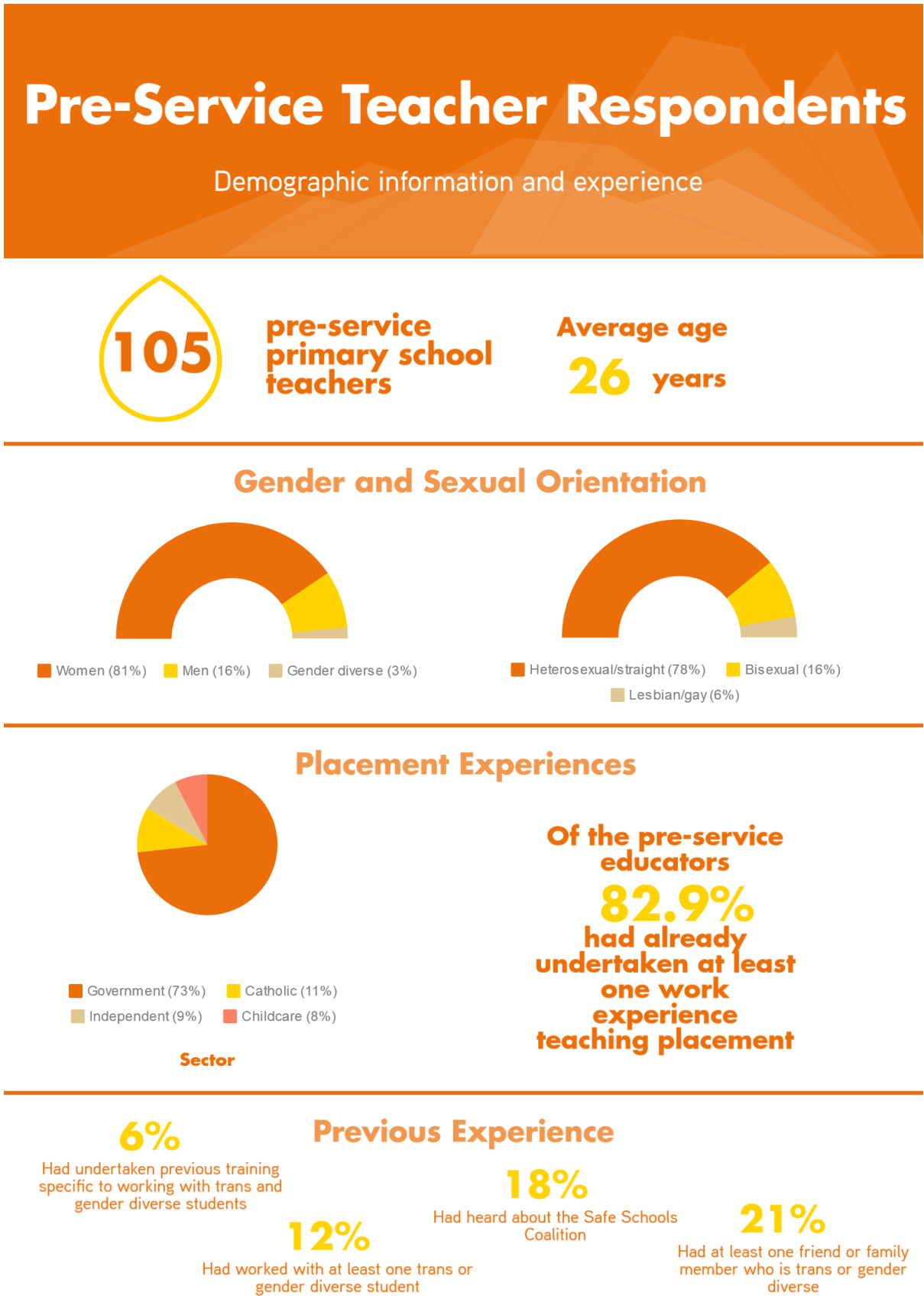


Figure 3: Quantitative survey findings

Quantitative Findings

Combined surveys of pre-service and in-service teachers

On average women (81) reported more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of trans and gender diverse students than did men (65)*

*the possible range for this measure was 19-95 with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes



Participants who had heard about the Safe Schools Coalition reported more positive attitudes towards inclusion, more confidence, and greater comfort in working with trans and gender diverse students than did those who had not heard about it.

Those who were the most confident in working with trans and gender diverse students were those who were:



The most comfortable



Had previously taught a student



Had undertaken training

Figure 4: Training requested by teachers and pre-service teachers



Figure 5: Resources requested by teachers and pre-service teachers



Picture Book Audit

Reading picture books with young children can be a useful way to discuss identities and diversity, as well as to promote inclusion, across a range of issues. Over the past two decades a growing number of picture books have included gay and lesbian characters, particularly focusing on families (for an analysis, see e.g. Sapp, 2010). However, the publication of picture books with trans or gender diverse characters has been slower, with books only appearing in the past decade. Naidoo argues that:

[c]hildren's books and materials that feature positive portrayals of transgender characters are needed to support the positive identity development of transgender children. Unfortunately, children's picture books and chapter books that present transgender children in such a matter-of-fact manner are virtually invisible in contemporary classrooms and libraries. Only a few are available from small presses and they rarely make their way into classrooms and onto library shelves. (2012: 39)

Others have also recently commented on the dearth of picture books with trans or gender diverse characters (Epstein, 2012; Naidoo, 2012; Paterson, 2015). While there are still relatively few picture books with trans or gender diverse characters, there has been a rapid growth of picture books in this area, with several new books being published in the last five years. This may at least in part be related to the increased availability of self-publishing options (Naidoo, 2012: 45).

Perhaps due to the relatively recent publication of picture books featuring trans or gender diverse characters, there has not to date been a comprehensive audit of such books. The existing sources most relevant are those that provide an audit of books with LGBTQ characters (Epstein, 2013; Naidoo, 2012; Toman, 2014), although these do not offer a comparative analysis of key patterns and themes across multiple books, and only Naidoo identifies more than one picture book with a trans character. Lester (2014) examined a small number of 'queer-themed' books, including three books with trans characters, arguing that they are gender normative, and have little diversity in terms of race and class.

To address this gap in terms of surveying the available picture books featuring trans or gender diverse characters, an extensive search was conducted to identify all such books. This involved searches for books and reviews on Amazon and Goodreads, Google searches, and following up books mentioned in previous publications and audits. Only books published in hard copy which could be read with children in a way that other picture books would be were included.

A total of 34 books were identified. An overview of the books is provided in Figure 6 and a complete list of the books in Figure 7. As outlined in Figure 8, many of the books rely upon a binary model of gender, emphasise clothing and hair styles as determining gender, and reinforce the idea that professionals are the people best suited to 'diagnosing' gender.

This audit suggests that while the growth of books in this area is important, further growth is required to provide a more diverse range of books that address gender beyond binary categories, and which acknowledge children's right to self authorisation.

Figure 6: Overview of picture books featuring trans and gender diverse characters

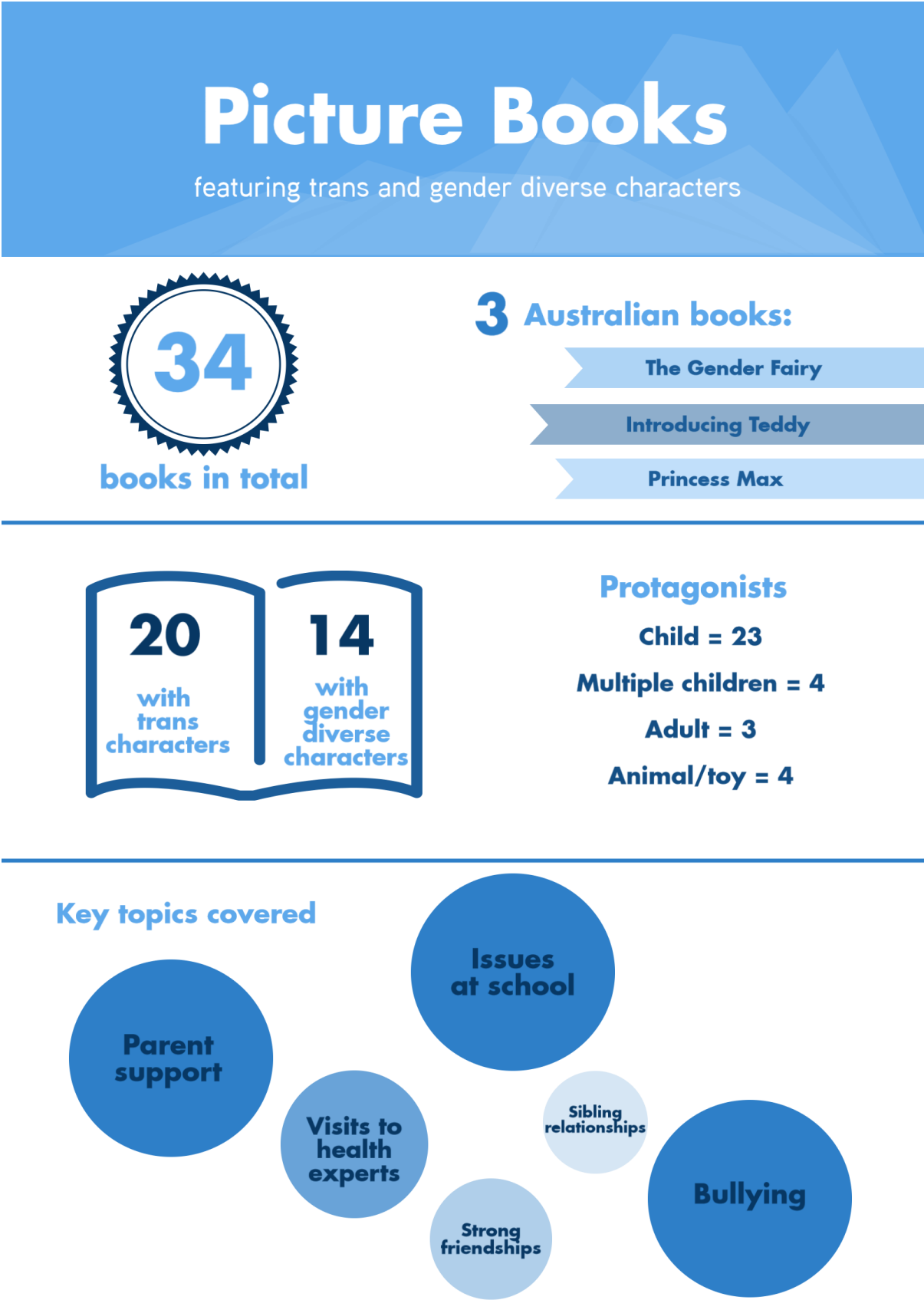


Figure 7: List of picture books featuring trans and gender diverse characters

<h1>List of Picture Books</h1> <h2>featuring trans and gender diverse characters</h2>				
Character	Title	Author/Illustrator	Year	Publisher
Trans girls	<i>10,000 Dresses</i>	Ewert & Ray	2008	Seven Stories Press
	<i>The Adventures of Tulip The Birthday Wish Fairy</i>	Bergman & Malik	2012	Flamingo Rampant
	<i>Be Who You Are</i>	Carr & Rumbach	2010	AuthorHouse
	<i>But, I'm Not a Boy!</i>	Leone & Pfeifer	2014	CreateSpace
	<i>I Am Jazz</i>	Herthel, Jennings & McNicholas	2014	Penguin
	<i>My Favorite Color is Pink</i>	Benedetto	2015	CreateSpace
	<i>Pearl's Christmas Present</i>	Wurst	2004	Pearl and Dotty
	<i>The Royal Heart</i>	McGoon & Orr	2015	Avid Readers
	<i>When Kayla was Kyle</i>	Fabrikant & Levine	2013	Avid Readers
Trans women	<i>My New Mommy</i>	Mossiano & Mossiano	2012	Spun Silver Productions
Trans boys	<i>About Chris</i>	Benedetto	2015	CreateSpace
	<i>Backwards Day</i>	Bergman & Diamond	2012	Flamingo Rampant
	<i>A Princess of Great Daring!</i>	Hill-Meyer & Toczynski	2015	Flamingo Rampant
Trans men	<i>When Kathy is Keith</i>	Wong	2011	Xlibris
	<i>My New Daddy</i>	Mossiano & Mossiano	2012	Spun Silver Productions
Trans toys	<i>Rough, Tough Charley</i>	Kay & Gustavson	2007	Tricycle Press
	<i>Introducing Teddy: A story about being yourself</i>	Walton & MacPherson	2016	Bloomsbury
Species change as metaphor for trans	<i>Goblinheart: A Fairy Tale</i>	Axel & Bidlespacher	2012	East Waterfront Press
	<i>Muffy was Fluffy</i>	DuBois & Grenier	2012	PublishAmerica
	<i>When Leonard Lost His Spots: A Trans Parent Tail</i>	Costa & Shupik	2012	My Family!
Non-binary gender	<i>Are You A Boy or Are You A Girl?</i>	Savage & Fisher	2015	TQUAL Books
	<i>Meet Polkadot</i>	Broadhead	2013	DangerDot Publishing
Gender diverse	<i>Are You a Boy or a Girl?</i>	Jiménez	2000	Green Dragon Press
	<i>My Princess Boy</i>	Kilodavis & DeSimone	2010	Aladdin
	<i>Play Free</i>	Mason & Suarez	2013	Max 'n Me Studio
Gender diverse, focused on clothing	<i>Jacob's New Dress</i>	Hoffman, Hoffman & Case	2014	Albert Whitman & Company
	<i>Jesse's Dream Skirt</i>	Mack & Buchanan	1979	Lollipop Power, Inc
	<i>Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress</i>	Baldacchino & Malenfant	2014	Groundwood Books
	<i>Princess Max</i>	Stiller & Rogers	2001	Random House Australia
	<i>Roland Humphrey is Wearing a WHAT?</i>	Kiernan-Johnson & Revenaugh	2012	Huntley Rahara Press
Multiple characters	<i>The Adventures of Tina & Jordan</i>	Lam	2013	Xlibris
	<i>All I Want to Be Is Me</i>	Rothblatt	2011	CreateSpace
	<i>The Gender Fairy</i>	Hirst & Wirt	2015	Oban Road Publishing
	<i>Is That For A Boy or A Girl?</i>	Bergman & Dougherty	2015	Flamingo Rampant

Figure 8: Key themes of picture books featuring trans characters



Picture Book Reading Sessions

Previous research has provided evidence for the merits of teaching about gender diversity in the classroom, including through the use of picture books (DePalma, 2013; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2014; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013).

Given the role that picture books can play in facilitating inclusion of diversity, and given the problematic aspects identified with regard to some of the picture books included in the audit, it was important to assess what children made of the books. A class of Reception/Year 1 students participated in book reading sessions to discuss six of the picture books that featured trans characters. The class was from a co-educational government school in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. Around a third of the students at the school had a language background other than English.

The class teacher sent home a letter of introduction and consent form with each student in the class. All 21 students in the class were given permission to participate. After obtaining parent/guardian consent, each student was invited to participate in the book reading sessions. The class was read six books featuring trans characters across five sessions conducted in November 2015. The six books were *10,000 Dresses*, *Backwards Day*, *I Am Jazz*, *My New Mommy*, *My New Daddy*, and *When Kathy is Keith*.

In order to fit with regular story reading sessions which already occurred in class, the class teacher read the books to the students and then the lead researcher facilitated a discussion based on questions. Questions included what students thought the book would be about from looking at the cover, what they understood the book to be about after reading, whether they liked the end of the story, and what would happen if there were more pages (based on previous research: Bartholomaeus, 2015). Sessions went for approximately 30-60 minutes each.

Reading and discussing books and stories is a familiar practice in junior primary classrooms, making this a logical area to promote inclusion and understanding. It was clear that one-off readings of a series of picture books could generate discussions about trans and gender diverse people and help young students to develop their understanding, but that this topic was new for most of the students and therefore needed more exploration. The book reading sessions allowed students to discuss and respond to the books in a context where they were allowed to try out their ideas as well as saying they did not understand. Findings from the book reading sessions are reported further in Figure 9.

Overall it would appear that while reading books such as these with young students is important, this needs to be clearly framed by information so as to facilitate understanding. For students who were not familiar with the topic, some of the narratives made little sense, although understanding appeared to increase across the sessions. Informed teaching would allow a space to provide explanations and explore students' questions in order to increase knowledge and contribute to more inclusive school cultures. While some framing appears required so that young students can make the most of reading these books, it is nonetheless important that books such as these are added to current library holdings. Availability of such books can both increase awareness amongst students in general, and allow trans and gender diverse students specifically to see themselves reflected in the literature they read.

Figure 9: Student responses in book reading sessions

Book Reading Sessions

Student responses

Students showed support for characters and liked happy endings

Good when the boys stopped teasing her.
(I Am Jazz)

I like the ending because she cuts her hair and maybe when she took her dress off her hair went short.
(When Kathy is Keith)

Their Mum turned a boy because he wear boy's clothes, a small boy's clothes a little bit.
(My New Daddy)

Students frequently drew on hair and clothing to discuss gender... which was often a reflection of the framing of the books

Students explained transitioning with phrases like 'turned into' and 'wanting to be a boy/girl'

I liked the story because the Mum turned into a boy.
(My New Daddy)

He wants, boys don't wear dresses like girls and, and he wants to wear a dress like girls so he said 'I wanna be a girl'
(10,000 Dresses)

It's the same book like we read before... it says My New Mum and he turns into Mum when he was a Dad and now the Mum is going to a Dad.
(My New Daddy)

Some students drew connections between the books

Students sometimes expressed their confusion over the books... which highlights the need for informed teaching

I didn't understand is it a boy or a girl?
(I Am Jazz)

Online Resource

During the process of conducting the research it became clear that a comprehensive online resource was needed and not currently in existence.

An online resource was created as part of the project, collating sources and information for supporting trans and gender diverse children and young people. This resource fills a gap by providing all of this information on the one website.

The resource includes sections for young people, parents and families, educators and schools, mental health professionals, and researchers. Reviews of all of the picture books mentioned in this report are available under the 'young people' section of the website. More information about the online resource is included in Figure 10.

Currently the website averages over 1,000 unique visitors per month, with an average of approximately 2,500 total views per month. The most frequently viewed page (besides the home page) is the guides, booklets, and toolkits page for educators, demonstrating the potential uptake by educators. It is also evident that the website is being accessed by parents of young people in addition to mental health professionals across Australia.

A feature story about the website appeared in *The Advertiser* in December 2015, and a Twitter account attached to the website has received considerable engagement in terms of awareness of the website, the sharing of information (specifically amongst parents of trans or gender diverse children), and the capacity to engage in advocacy on behalf of children and their families (specifically with regard to challenging misconceptions).

The resource can be accessed at: www.the-rainbow-owl.com


Figure 10: The Rainbow Owl online resource

The Rainbow Owl

Online resource with information for supporting trans and gender diverse young people

For Young People	For Mental Health Professionals
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Picture books- Chapter books- YA books- Non fiction books- Guides, booklets, and toolkits- Websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Books- Journal articles- Professional guidelines- Resources
For Parents and Families	For Researchers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Books- Guides, booklets, and toolkits- Reports- Websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Books- Reports- Journal articles- Trans literature research- Websites
For Educators and Schools	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Books- Guides, booklets, and toolkits- Reports- Websites	

www.the-rainbow-owl.com



Recommendations

This project principally targets those who are working as primary school teachers, or who are intending to. As such, the following recommendations focus on improved professional development, education, support, and resources for teachers, drawing on the findings from our South Australian research.

1. The provision of ongoing teacher education, as professional development and within universities

- a. **Existing teachers:** All existing teachers should have access to ongoing professional development and learning in regard to working with trans and gender diverse children and creating inclusive whole school cultures.
- b. **Pre-service teachers:** All pre-service teacher education programs in South Australia should include information about supporting trans and gender diverse students within their courses for primary educators.
- c. **Ongoing professional development and programs:** Professional development and programs, whether for current or future teachers, must address the following issues:
 - i. *Understanding gender diversity:* Information about trans and gender diverse people beyond the limitations of the medical model, including a critical awareness that a binary model of gender is socially constructed as well as a focus on inclusive language.
 - ii. *Understanding the potential vulnerability of trans and gender diverse children:* This includes supporting individual students and awareness-raising about the potential negative experiences of trans and gender diverse children, whether through conscious mistreatment or continued lack of knowledge.
 - iii. *Essential practical knowledge:* Specific knowledge about the typical problems schools face in adjusting to gender diversity, addressing:
 1. Toilet facilities (availability of unisex, or gender-affirming facilities)
 2. Uniforms (all uniform options available to each child)
 3. Sports participation (all sports options available to each child)
 4. Pronouns and chosen names (including legal and administrative requirements)
 - iv. *Contributing to whole school change:* Awareness that change needs to occur at a whole school level, with senior leadership support.
 - v. *Supporting families:* Strategies for supporting parents and other family members of trans and gender diverse children, particularly those who are finding it difficult to support their children.
 - vi. *Curriculum issues:* Broad-based training around how to make curriculum inclusive for trans and gender diverse children, extending on the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum of *Personal*

and social capability and Ethical understanding and Literacy, particularly within, but not limited to, the discipline areas of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Health and Physical Education. When currently available curriculum materials are inadequate (as noted in this study in regard to picture books), such training can show how existing materials can be read 'against-the-grain' to promote greater understanding.

2. Additional resourcing of programs aimed at facilitating inclusion, such as the Safe Schools Coalition

- a. **Ongoing resourcing and funding of key programs:** The key opportunity to provide professional development and create whole school change is via the Safe Schools Coalition (through SHine SA) and, based on the demonstrated needs of teachers and students, funding for this at the primary level is strongly recommended.

3. DECD-sanctioned policies and guidelines to support teachers and schools to create inclusive whole school cultures

- a. **Policies, guidelines, and programs:** Develop and/or monitor the use of standards and policies for gender diversity awareness, including policies around toilets, uniforms, and gender-affirming practices, including guidelines for redesigning toilet facilities on all education sites, as these are upgraded, or newly built. Gender diversity to be explicitly included within anti-harassment and anti-bullying programs at varying levels of schooling, as part of more general priorities around reducing gender-based violence. Importantly, this shifts the focus of bullying from the individual level to address the underlying causes related to discrimination because of gender diversity.
- b. **Ongoing support for teachers, school staff, and families:** DECD to provide email and phone support to teachers, school staff, and families, including guidance about relevant resources and further contacts.

4. Increase in provision of resources to learn about gender diversity, such as picture books in school libraries, and clearer teaching guides for how to use these in class

- a. **Provision of resources:** DECD to promote suitable and age-targeted resources for this work across all levels of education, including preschool, primary, and secondary schooling, such as The Rainbow Owl resource outlined earlier. These resources should be made available to all students, including via the school library.
- b. **Provision of teaching guides:** DECD to provide clearer teaching guides and support for teaching about gender diversity. As evident from the reading sessions, resources such as picture books are useful for discussing gender diversity with students but need to be accompanied by informed teaching. Where possible guidelines should be developed to address broader community views, including from other staff and parents, which shut down discussions about gender diversity and make them difficult areas to teach.

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